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Spatial Politics and Literacy: An Analysis of Little Free Libraries and Neighborhood Distribution of Book-Sharing Depositories in Portland, Oregon and Detroit, Michigan

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RESEARCH QUESTION

What role can Free Little Libraries play in early literacy and book access in known book deserts? How do socioeconomic markers for race, income, and education correlate with an abundance of LFL locations, and do those markers align with the need-based communities the LFL organization seeks to serve in its mission?

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to interrogate whether Free Little Libraries (LFL), the largest branded book-sharing movement in the world, continues to uphold its currently stated mission to provide book access to communities where book accessibility is low (determined by how many estimated books are in each household). Though the Little Free Library nonprofit has flourished in the decade since it was founded, indicating a fondness and appreciation for the Little Library as an idea and neighborhood ornament alike, critics of the organization have raised multiple concerns about whether the library boxes provide service to those who need them. There is a not uncommon perception that LFL boxes are congregated around affluent neighborhoods, often white, where book scarcity isn't a problem at all, potentially leaving behind the communities that could most benefit from their presence.

In response, this paper seeks to explore and compare the presence of LFLs in two cities: Portland Oregon, a city well-known for its strong literary community, and Detroit, Michigan, a well-documented book desert. In Detroit, where there is only a total of 48 LFL boxes, nearly 20% were located in the waterfront municipalities that represent the southern Grosse Pointes; in Portland, where the population is 77% white and mostly affluent, there are nearly four times as many library boxes as there are in Detroit, despite both cities having a difference in land area of less than 100 square feet, and total population differences of ~30,000 people. Education played a slightly less significant role in the presence of LFLs, with a greater number of libraries appearing proportionately in neighborhoods with higher educations.

The findings of this research reaffirm that though most LFL locations align with majority demographics overall, LFL boxes are disproportionately concentrated in white, affluent neighborhoods, even when near book deserts.

KEYWORDS

book-sharing, Little Free Libraries, libraries, reading, literacy, book desert, spatial politics, income segregation, neighborhood, community, accessibility, Detroit, Michigan, Wayne County, Portland, Oregon, Multnomah County

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INTRODUCTION

The meteoric rise and staying power of branded book-sharing in recent years has sent ripples through the literary community, quickly becoming a catalyzing topic amongst those who have encountered them. The Little Free Library (LFL)—a compact, aesthetically pleasing encapsulation of the literary community, represented by the personalized book boxes that have popped up all over the world since the inception of the nonprofit inception—is easily both the most popular and pervasive of the personal libraries. In rising to such success, LFL has catalyzed the literary community in completely unexpected ways. For some, LFL represents community building and innovative literacy; to others, they're misnamed lawn ornaments that represent the commoditization of literary culture, little more than a nuisance to the neighborhoods and people who have purchased and placed them in front of their homes or businesses—known in the LFL community as *stewards*.

It's only in recent years that academics and some librarians have begun asking questions or researching LFLs in earnest, including posing questions about the communities and spaces that are likely to house LFLs,[1] what kind of books are likely to be found in the library boxes, and whether their presence has any effect on literacy in the neighborhoods that house them. This research aims to explore these questions through literature review and a comparative analysis of LFL locations in Portland, Oregon and Detroit, Michigan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A BRIEF HISTORY OF LITTLE FREE LIBRARIES

In 2009, Todd Bol constructed the first LFL in the front yard of his mother's Hudson, Wisconsin home, inadvertently taking the first steps towards building a global phenomenon.[2] It

[1] Snow, "Little Free Libraries."

[2] Aldrich, *The Little Free Library Book*; Kirch, "Little Free Library, Founder's Family Clash Over Organization's Direction."

wasn't long before his neighbors became smitten with the book-filled box-on-a-stick, so he built more, selling some and gifting others, setting a modest goal for how many he'd like to have in the world.[3] Hudson's location relative to Madison fueled its growth, and soon more cities followed suit as Bol developed long-term goals for the nonprofit. With the help of a colleague named Richard Brooks, Bol soon had a website and a range of information about the project, and people everywhere began taking notice.

Establishing, running, and accessing the LFL system is simple enough. Potential stewards—the person or organization that installs, maintains, and sometimes curates the contents of LFL boxes—can build their own Free Little Library box, or they can buy one of several options from the LFL website. Prices for fully constructed boxes begin at $145 for the simplest version and top out at $500, but there are also individual elements and unassembled kits for purchase, as well as countless DIY options to build them from scrap or reclaimed materials. Regardless of how it comes to exist, no LFL is complete and official until a steward registers the box on the LFL website—a $40 charge that comes with a customized plaque identifying the depository as an official part of the movement, while also assigning it an official charter number. Registration is the most important step; because Little Free Library is a restricted, registered trademark, stewards can run afoul with the company even if they're not calling the library box by the same name.[4] Once registered, a chartered library is placed on the map for neighbors to find, and a neighborhood—at least on paper—is one step closer to book accessibility and literacy.

The privilege of reliable and constant access to books cannot be overstated in its importance to literacy and educational outcomes in a community, and in some ways, LFLs can seem like an easy

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[3] Ross, "Todd Bol, Creator of the Little Free Library Movement, Dies at 62."

[4] Kirch, "Little Free Library, Founder's Family Clash Over Organization's Direction"; "Little Free Library Trademark FAQs."

answer to what turns out to be a very complicated question, with a number of systemic contributing factors. In an interview, Bol once said he wanted "to see a Little Free Library on every block and a book in every hand."[5]

The ripples of these library boxes have been unmistakable. The literary community recognized them quickly as revolutionary, showering them with accolades including the National Book Foundation's Innovations in Reading award in 2013 and a Library of Congress Literary award in 2015.[6] Locally focused groups looking build stronger communities through actionable service held fundraisers in an effort to add LFLs to their spaces ,[7] independent book lovers everywhere have self-funded boxes for their front yards and nearby public spaces ,[8] and, in some areas, they have been embraced as interactive art installations and alternative libraries in spaces where access can be limited.[9]

But apprehensions remain about whether LFL's noble intentions translate adequately in their execution. Academics began questioning the LFL movement shortly before Bol's unexpected death in 2018, and amidst a legal clash about trademarks and intentionality, members of the literary community raised a dearth of questions. From wondering how involved the role of stewardship is to the quality and quantity of titles in LFL boxes[10] to trying to establish exactly how exploitative "branded book-sharing" is in the commoditization of the literary community,[11] calls to investigate the impact of LFLs rose from what was once a passive space.

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[5] See note 2 above.
[6] "Little Free Library (2020A)."
[7] Aldrich, *The Little Free Library Book*; "Kickstarter: Little Free Library Project."
[8] Kozak, "Building Community, Breaking Barriers."
[9] Sarmiento, Sims, and Morales, "Little Free Libraries."
[10] Kozak, "Building Community, Breaking Barriers"; Snow, "Little Free Libraries."
[11] Burnett, "Libraries Against Capitalism."

One especially critical review of the movement even asked, "Does that birdhouse filled with paperbacks on your block represent an adorable neighborhood amenity or the 'corporatization of literary philanthropy'?", later concluding that the depositories "sprout where public library branches are plentiful and where neighborhoods are white."[12] In fact, questions about where LFLs are likely to be found is an ongoing curiosity, as their location can inform who owns them, who curates them, and who has access to them. Early research from locations in Canada and the U.S. concluded that LFLs mostly appear in medium- to high-income neighborhoods, thus having the potential to become obstacles for the low-income patrons in nearby neighborhoods.[13]

It's a persistent worry, especially with the rapid proliferation that took these library boxes from grassroots to global in a decade. The success of the LFL movement is indicative of a much larger community of support than opposition. As of March 2020, the official Little Free Library website recognized over 100,000 officially registered FLL locations across 108 countries around the world,[14] meaning it's well past time to begin drawing more solid conclusions about the point where gatekeeping of LFLs occurs. If, as the claims suggest, the majority of LFLs are mostly in communities not experiencing book shortages, it may introduce critical flaws that undermine their roles as literacy tools in low-income and low-literacy communities.

THE ROLE OF STEWARDSHIP

The important role of libraries in society and culture has been demonstrated far and wide along the course of human history, serving as the touchstone for the rise and fall of entire empires. Today, it has come to represent access to knowledge, entertainment, public services like computers

[12] Capps, "These Librarians Really Hate Little Free Libraries."
[13] Schmidt and Hale, "Little Free Libraries®."
[14] "Little Free Library (2020B)."

and internet access, and safe gathering spaces for people of all kinds. Their importance was never lost on Bol, whose (retrospectively modest) goal was to supply over 2508 libraries across the country, which would surpass the number of library locations funded by steel mogul and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie at the turn of the 20th century.[15]

It's unclear at first glance how much the philosophy behind librarianship informed Bol's LFL movement, however. The methods librarians use to acquire and manage collections is well-documented in library and information science (LIS) publications and include a number of specifications that dictate their actions as unbiased proxies to create diverse, balanced, and high-quality collections featuring a variety of viewpoints, even ones that go against their own or the collective viewpoints of the communities they serve.[16] For librarians, the importance of community needs and requests is paramount. They must meet these needs as best they can, evaluating collection acquisitions and curation through financial and cultural lenses informed by the resources provided by their branches. But they always serve the community, doing their best to provide literacy and resource access to as many people as possible.

If the role of the librarian is the most important part of a public library system, it stands to reason that the role of steward would be equally important to the success of the LFL box. However, on closer investigation, it becomes abundantly clear that while the LFL website provides some resources for stewards, their program lacks even a fraction of the depth that LIS services provide librarians to conduct their work. Instead, LFL has distilled their advice to stewards into a single question on their FAQ page and a few suggestions from the 8-page document known as the *Stewards' Guide*, which is sent to new stewards in their charter package.

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[15] "Little Free Library (2020A)."

[16] Oltmann, "Public Librarians' Views on Collection Development and Censorship."

The first, addressing what to do with "inappropriate" materials in a library box, suggests stewards should "curate [their LFL] in a way that makes [them] comfortable" while also keeping an open mind about content they might not usually keep for themselves. They actively discourage the banning of books but recommend "culling" or "weeding" books that aren't appropriate for their LFL boxes or disagree with their personal sensibilities[17]. Aldrich even suggests removing "hot-blooded romance novels […] where all the men have hairless chests and the plots are poorly written," if it's not the kind of book the steward prefers to see.[18] The *Stewards' Guide* is even more vaguer, including only two specific references to how to manage LFL contents, suggesting stewards should be discerning about the books inside, taking care to cycle out books that aren't moving, and that "[p]eople like pretty, shiny, well-kept books…not outdated, yellowing, mass-market paperbacks."[19]

Meanwhile, the rest of the LFL website provides little insight into stewardship, instead redirecting attention from the contents of the book to the heartwarming stories of community building and successful stewardship around the world. The section of the website targeted towards stewards includes printable marketing and promotional materials (including fliers, stickers, and bookplates), creative templates for community outreach (including outreach to news outlets to increase box visibility), a literary calendar around which stewards can hold events, and a Facebook support group for stewards only, which requires an active charter number to join. Whether they provide more comprehensive stewardship guidance or resources within that group is unclear.

With only subjectivity and the contradictory advice of LFL to guide them, stewards may find themselves falling into behaviors that contribute to censorship within their communities, rather

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[17] "Little Free Library (2020B)."
[18] Aldrich, *The Little Free Library Book*.
[19] Little Free Library, *Steward's Guide*.

than uplifting it. If some stewards can and do remove religious texts or books featuring swear words in the title,[20] there is also nothing stopping stewards from removing books featuring stories about Black and brown protagonists, LGBTQ+ issues, sex, divorce, depression and mental health, or any number of other topics that stewards might find personally unsavory or inappropriate for their patrons, but would otherwise be shelved in public libraries.

Which is why it is important to take note of the communities in which LFLs are concentrated, who stewards them, and how their locations can affect the kinds of content that reach readers. For example, if books only appear in affluent, white-dominated neighborhoods, any number of factors might play a role in a young, Black reader not finding a title that reflects their experiences or needs, whether because spatial politics made accessing the box too high-risk, or because a library steward curated out the content they felt didn't align with their moral and community standards.

It feels only appropriate to also acknowledge how the role of Little Free Libraries changed essentially overnight in some places following the coronavirus outbreak by changing their library boxes to small pantries.[21] Though some expressed concerns about the safety of taking food from unsecured locations during a pandemic,[22] as panicked shoppers cleared shelves of essential goods to take into quarantine, some stewards removed the books from their LFLs in order to fill them with food; some stewards even modified the boxes to reduce excess contact for visitors.[23] In response to the change, the LFL organization deployed a temporary map for stewards to list their "sharing boxes" (Figure 1).

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[20] Kozak, "'I Can't Have That in There."
[21] "Little Libraries Become Food Pantries during COVID-19."
[22] Day, "Little Libraries Pantry."
[23] CNN, "People Are Stocking Little Free Libraries with Food and Goods during Coronavirus Pandemic."

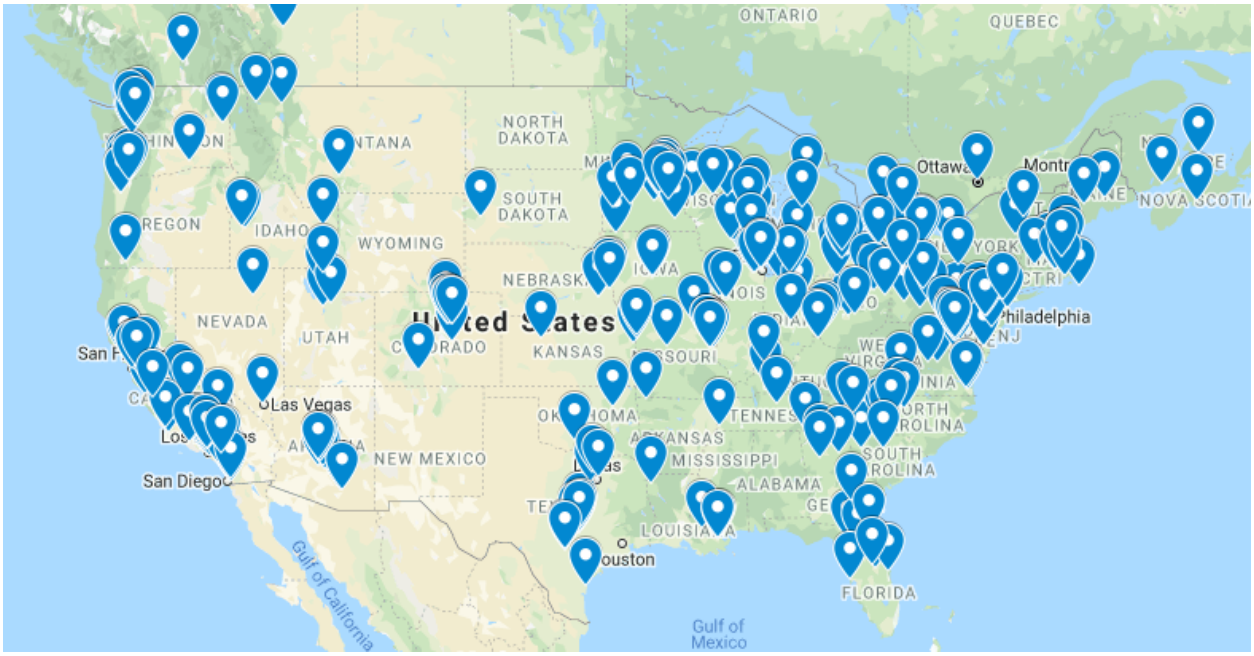

Figure 1. Map of "sharing boxes" in the U.S. during the COVID-19 outbreak.

BOOK ACCESS AND LITERACY

According to Neuman & Moland, neighborhoods can and do "influence the choices people make, the opportunities and institutions they are able to access, and the ways they may be treated by others." [24]When children and families can access books through reliable, curated locations like local bookstores, well-funded schools, and local libraries, they are more likely to begin laying the foundations for reading and writing at a younger age. As such access to print is one of the most important indicators of literacy outcomes in children, providing them with valuable tools that directly relate to their educational success[25] and serving as a primary factor in their development of language and comprehension skills at young ages.[26] When children lack access to age-appropriate books, they no longer have the choice of considering reading as an option, which can dramatically shift the baseline for what is considered "normal" literacy levels for entire neighborhoods, as some

[24] Neuman and Moland, "Book Deserts."
[25] See note 24 above.
[26] Hamilton, "Availability of Literature: The Little Free Library."

of the critical skills gained from early literacy can increase financial and special mobility in adulthood.

The absence of reliable, permanent access to books in the home can also lead to what has come to be known by researchers and literacy advocates as the *book desert*, a term chosen by Neuman and Moland for its ability to compare literacy access shortages to the more well-known food deserts. The term, they suggest, brings with it all the means to include and assess the structural inequalities that cause the shortages in the first place[27]. Meanwhile, Unite for Literacy (UFL), an advocacy organization that provides digital libraries to families through their website, provides us with a clearer way of assessing the presence of book deserts by estimating the number of households in an area with at least 100 books.[28] Using that number, one rooted in academic articles including Neuman and Moland's, they have developed and continue to host an interactive map of book deserts using a number of prediction values and ACS data proxies that might indicate the presence of books in the household, the map paints a dire image of book scarcity for some places (Figure 2).

In rural counties like the one outlined by Beal & Burrow (2017), where two libraries serve over 60,000 people and are not supported by public transportation, the successful implementation of book depositories has hinged on their role being supplementary to the county options rather than competition. Success also leans heavily on the understanding of spatial limitations, where stewards must remain vigilant about accessibility concerns in a space where travel is often dictated by access to a personal vehicle (and, for children, a licensed and willing driver). While they ultimately paint a picture of success with their LFLs, they also work in a much different structure than the one found

[27] See note 24 above.
[28] Condon, "Are You Living in a Desert?"

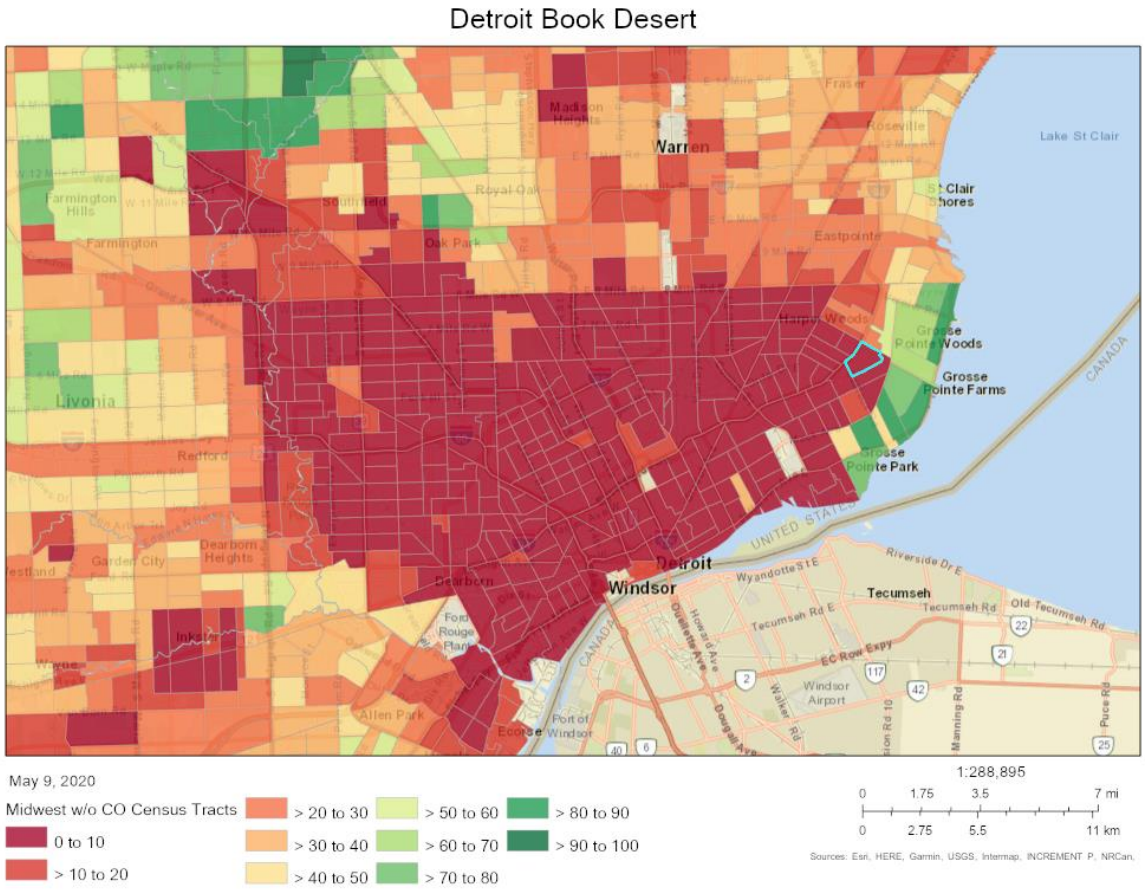

Figure 2. A map of the Detroit book desert and surrounding areas as presented by Unite for Literacy.

in most urban settings, where the obstacles to obtain, install, and maintain LFL boxes can be prohibitive due not only to the natural geography of the space, but also "socioeconomic residential sorting" or income segregation.

Driven most often by real estate value and rental prices, income segregation determines the mobility of most families in an urban setting and can lead cyclical patterns of wealth and poverty over the long term. It is characterized by spatial segregation between poverty and affluence, in which the highest income households are isolated from middle- and low-income households,[29]

[29] Reardon and Bischoff, "Income Inequality and Income Segregation."

which also impacts access to public amenities. High-income neighborhoods are likely to have better access to things like libraries and parks, better schools with smaller class sizes, more skilled teachers with better supplies, and more numerous, varied opportunities for social growth. These factors compound upon one another, leading to more positive outcomes in affluent neighborhoods.

And as better resources exacerbate the advantages of wealth in high-income and middle-income neighborhoods, in low-income neighborhoods the same is true—to vastly different results. In low-income neighborhoods, the development and fostering of a "scholarly culture"—one where books are "numerous, esteemed and enjoyed" in the household[30] —can be much more difficult to cultivate than in affluent ones. Schools and libraries in poverty and borderline neighborhoods often struggle with low funding, poor or inconvenient travel accessibility, and staffing shortages that can buckle under excess demand when other resources are diverted or unavailable. One nearly perfect example of this can be found in the Anacostia library in Detroit. When it was forced to close for repairs over the course of a summer, the next closest library—which does not exist on an easy public transit line—found it difficult to handle the increased demand on their services and time. It is a deft illustration of how important permanent access to books truly is. Sole reliance on public libraries is not enough to combat book scarcity in homes, especially if the system is one hiccup or catastrophe away from failure.

When coupled with the dramatic repercussions of income segregation, it comes as no surprise that in some neighborhoods, LFLs have become staples through what Sarmiento et al., (2018) calls *guerilla urbanism*. These tactical, organized interventions are meant to provide cost-effective, often do-it-yourself (DIY), temporary or semi-permanent solutions to structural urban problems. When used strategically by community leaders, LFLs can be implemented in ways that

[30] McQuillan and Au, "THE EFFECT OF PRINT ACCESS ON READING FREQUENCY."

disrupt the patterns of book scarcity in the short and long term, all while increasing community investment in the project and often reducing startup costs for a project that can quickly become cost prohibitive.

In this way, income segregated neighborhoods can take some control of the narratives surrounding their communities and shore up the gaps left by inadequate public support systems. Urbanism also allows low-income neighborhoods to establish books curated for their community, by their community, where both spatial access and curation concerns can be considerably reduced.

METHODS & LIMITATIONS

CONSIDERATIONS FOR COVID-19

Due to circumstances surrounding the global outbreak of COVID-19, the original methods for this research paper had to be changed. Of greatest importance is the lack of qualitative data in the form of interviews. The original data-gathering methods included short-term collaboration with at least one LFL in the Portland community and aimed to inquire about the frequency of LFL box uses, identify the kinds of people who patronize and steward them, and offset the featurelessness of the raw data and provide insight into the community niches they're in.

Without the mobility to conduct interviews and identify LFL and library patrons as planned, I changed both the focus of my research and my methods to better accommodate a quantitative evaluation supported primarily through literature review. I accomplished this by choosing to run a comparative analysis of my data from my primary location (Portland, Oregon) against a second location with similar spatial and population metrics with one critical difference: my second location would be a book desert.

After reviewing several book deserts, I ultimately chose the Detroit Metropolitan area in Michigan because of the unique metrics that differ it from Portland. A well-documented book desert characterized by deep income and racial segregation, the foil it could provide against Portland's

notoriously and middle-class culture seemed an appropriate way to boldly highlight how these socioeconomic factors contribute to the presence and frequency of LFLs.

LITTLE FREE LIBRARY LOCATION DATA

Though the LFL organization hosts a map on their website that displays all officially registered library boxes, making it easy to find locations by a number of variables—including distance, zip code, and charter number—there is no easy way to extract location data from the map itself. As a result, I manually transcribed the location coordinates and charter numbers into a spreadsheet, which would later be uploaded as overlays on the map visualizations of census data for selected ACS datasets.

There is a low risk that during transcription, LFL library locations were either missed or improperly transcribed, although quality control measures were taken (taking a count of LFLs in each location prior to transcription, uploading the data into Google Maps where locations could be verified and corrected). Though the dataset has been confirmed free of any major transcription errors, minor errors may result in location pins that are slightly shifted from true location; if this has occurred, I have determined that it is unlikely to have any considerable impact in the findings, as the research question revolves not only around where LFL boxes are, but how many are in each region.

CENSUS DATA AND MAP GENERATION

Portland and Detroit share several similar features that make them perfect locations for the comparisons being made in this study. Table 1 illustrates all metrics that were used to determine study suitability and, later, used to generate visualization maps. In variances reflected universally across early demographic data (population, population density, land area, and age distribution of the population), Portland is the smaller of the two cities. With only a 5.6% difference in total population and just 91 square feet in land area, at first glance it would be easy to set the same expectations for each.

Table 1. Detroit And Portland Demographics

	DETROIT, MI		PORTLAND, OR	
Total Population	**677,155**		**639,387**	
Population Density (Per Sq. Mile)	4881.6		4,792.3	
Area (Land in Sq. Miles)	138.71		133.42	
POPULATION BY AGE				
Total Population	**677,155**		**639,387**	
Under 5 Years	49,366	7.30%	34,651	5.40%
5 to 9 Years	45,598	6.70%	34,038	5.30%
10 to 14 Years	46,471	6.90%	29,727	4.70%
15 to 17 Years	28,331	4.20%	17,306	2.70%
18 to 24 Years	72,926	10.80%	51,799	8.10%
25 to 34 Years	98,110	14.50%	126,817	19.80%
35 to 44 Years	79,328	11.70%	108,599	17.00%
45 to 54 Years	82,849	12.20%	83,956	13.10%
55 to 64 Years	84,159	12.40%	73,770	11.50%
65 to 74 Years	52,869	7.80%	49,062	7.70%
75 to 84 Years	25,177	3.70%	19,834	3.10%
85 Years and Over	11,971	1.80%	9,828	1.50%
POPULATION BY RACE				
Total Population	**677,155**		**639,387**	
White Alone	98,534	14.60%	492,964	77.10%
Black or African American Alone	532,537	78.60%	36,801	5.80%
American Indian and Alaska Native Alone	2,285	0.30%	4,775	0.80%
Asian Alone	10,659	1.60%	51,543	8.10%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander Alone	185	0.00%	4,408	0.70%
Some Other Race Alone	19,760	2.90%	13,643	2.10%
Two or More Races	13,195	2.00%	35,253	5.50%
HOUSEHOLDS BY INCOME (IN 2018 INFLATION ADJUSTED DOLLARS)				
Total Number of Reported Households:	**260,383**		**264,428**	
Less than $25,000	114,335	43.90%	51,829	19.60%
$25,000 to $49,999	71,840	27.60%	51,429	19.50%
$50,000 to $74,999	36,655	14.10%	43,873	16.60%
$75,000 to $99,999	17,182	6.60%	33,953	12.80%
$100,000 or More	20,371	7.80%	83,344	31.50%
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT FOR POPULATION 25 YEARS AND OVER				
Population 25 and Over	434,463		471,866	
Less than High School	86,777	20.00%	36,928	7.80%
High School Diploma	284,525	65.50%	203,553	43.10%
Bachelor's Degree or Better	63,261	14.60%	231,385	49.00%

Table 1. Source: Social Explorer Tables: ACS 2018 (5-Year Estimates) (SE); U.S. Census Bureau

With conversations about literacy mostly taking place around children and early education, it was important to establish that both communities had similar numbers of children with the potential to be early readers (aged 5-9) and middle readers (aged 10-14) who could benefit from the literacy initiatives that surround the presence of tactically deployed LFLs. For the purpose of this study, children under five years of age were not included, as children of that age are unlikely to be able to independently seek and engage the benefits of LFL boxes for literacy development.

All map visualizations were created using three different datasets for both locations: percentage of the population based on median household income; percentage of the population by reported race; and percentage of the population 25 years and older, by education. These variables were chosen based on the hypothesis that LFLs are more likely to be in predominately white, affluent neighborhoods.

The data was visualized using the online demographic research website Social Explorer and pulled from information reported at the census tract level, allowing for a more nuanced view of population reporting more accurately than either city, county, or voting tracts could provide. The Portland Metropolitan data encompasses 144 tracts, while the Detroit Metropolitan area contains 327 tracts, including those for the Grosse Pointe municipalities, and Hamtramck City.

FINDINGS

Despite the close similarities Portland and Detroit have on a preliminary examination, the gulf between their LFL communities is vast. Portland has 182 chartered LFL locations, a number that falls just shy of quadrupling Detroit's 48 LFL locations. Because there is nearly an inversion of racial demographics and income segregation plays a role in the racial distribution of both cities to similar degrees, the majority of LFLs do tend to serve the majority racial demographic—in Portland, that is predominately white communities, and in Detroit that is predominantly Black communities.

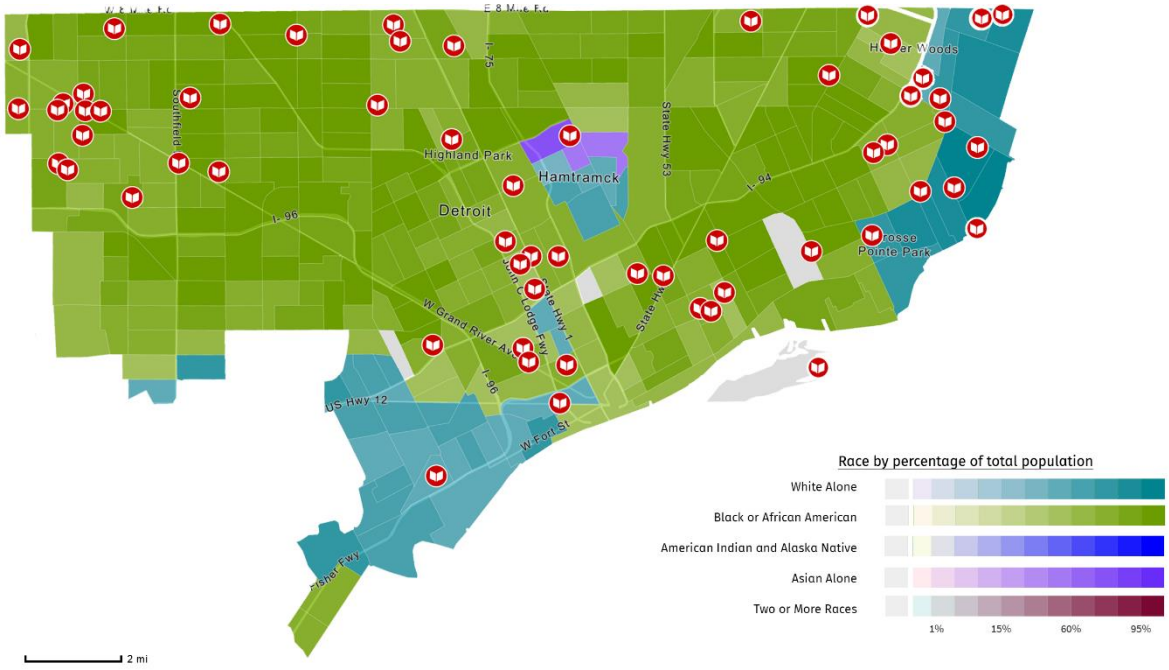

Figure 3. Map of Detroit LFL locations compared to racial demographics by census tracts.

In both cities, there was a clear trend for LFLs to concentrate more densely in predominately white communities by percentage. Though this is quite expected in Portland, where more than 75% of the population is white, the results were more stunning in Detroit, where 21% of LFL boxes were concentrated in and around predominantly white neighborhoods. Ten depositories were in the southern Grosse Pointes, and a lone depository located in southwest Detroit (Figure 3). There were no LFLs in Hamtramck, the only other predominantly white space, but a box did exist within two miles of the Hamtramck border to the north, where the racial makeup is predominantly Asian. Despite relative homogeneity of the Portland area, there were clear delineations in tracts where most households were less white; in at least one tract of North Portland and several smaller pockets in the southeast where the percentage of white residents was lower, there was a noticeable absence of LFLs (Figure 4).

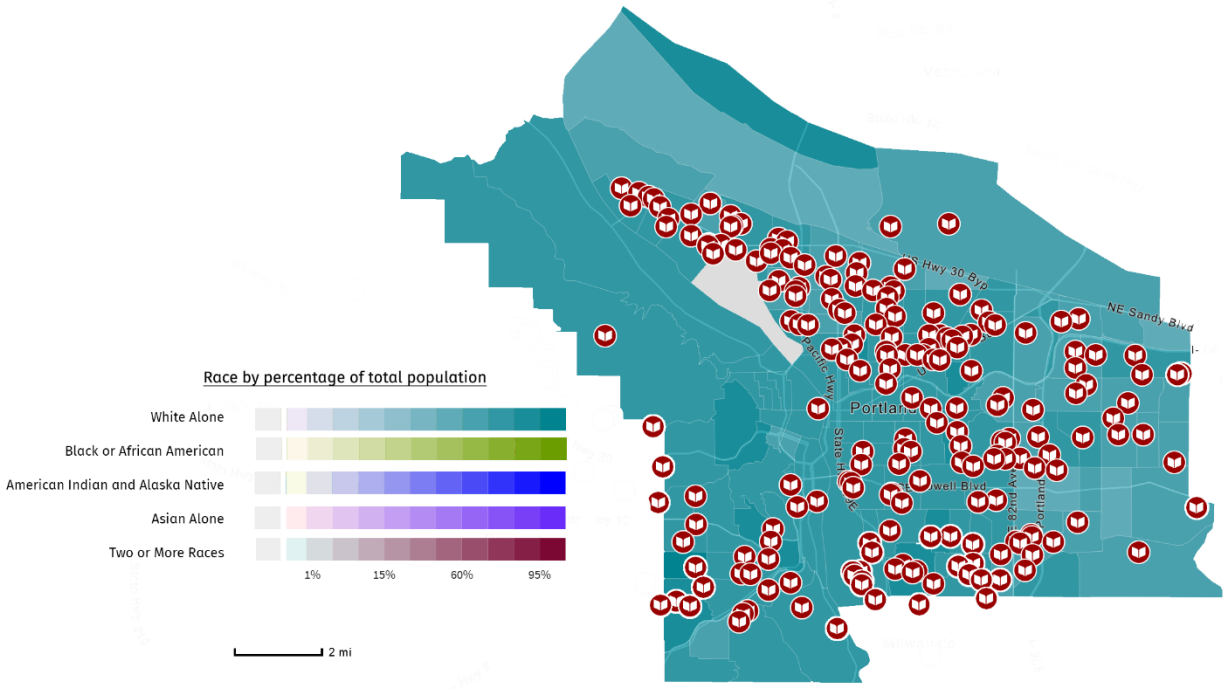

Figure 4. Map of Portland LFL locations compared to racial demographics by census tracts.

Nearly 50% of the population in Portland possesses a bachelor's degree, though the distribution of LFLs in county tracts with lower education levels (located mostly on the east side of the city) remained largely proportionate (Figure 5). In those areas where it differed, there was a strong correlation with a slightly decreased white population in the north and southeast. Meanwhile, much like race, education skewed dramatically in the Detroit area, where 65% of the population has only a high school education, and only 14.6% of the population has a bachelor's degree or higher. Based on similar interactions between race and education found in Portland, as well as discussed extensively in this paper, it logically follows that the percentage breakdown of LFLs in Detroit by education is extremely similar to the results of results by racial breakdown (Figure 6). Because of smaller pockets of higher education in Detroit, LFLs are more concentrated in white neighborhoods of Detroit when sorted in this fashion. However, unlike the race breakdown, because some LFLs are close to lower-education neighborhoods, and share a similar income with

neighboring spaces, it is possible that these LFLs do not post the same risk factors as those in high-income neighborhoods.

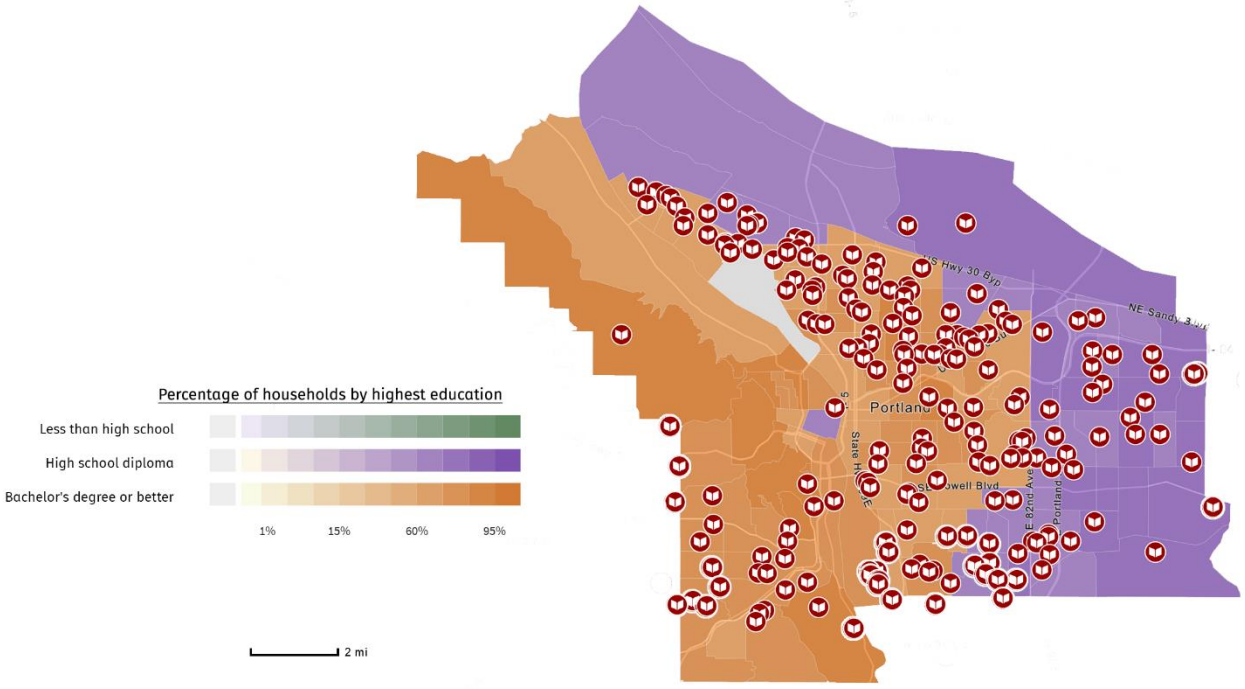

Figure 5. Map of Portland LFL locations in relation to education attained by population aged 25+, based on census tracts.

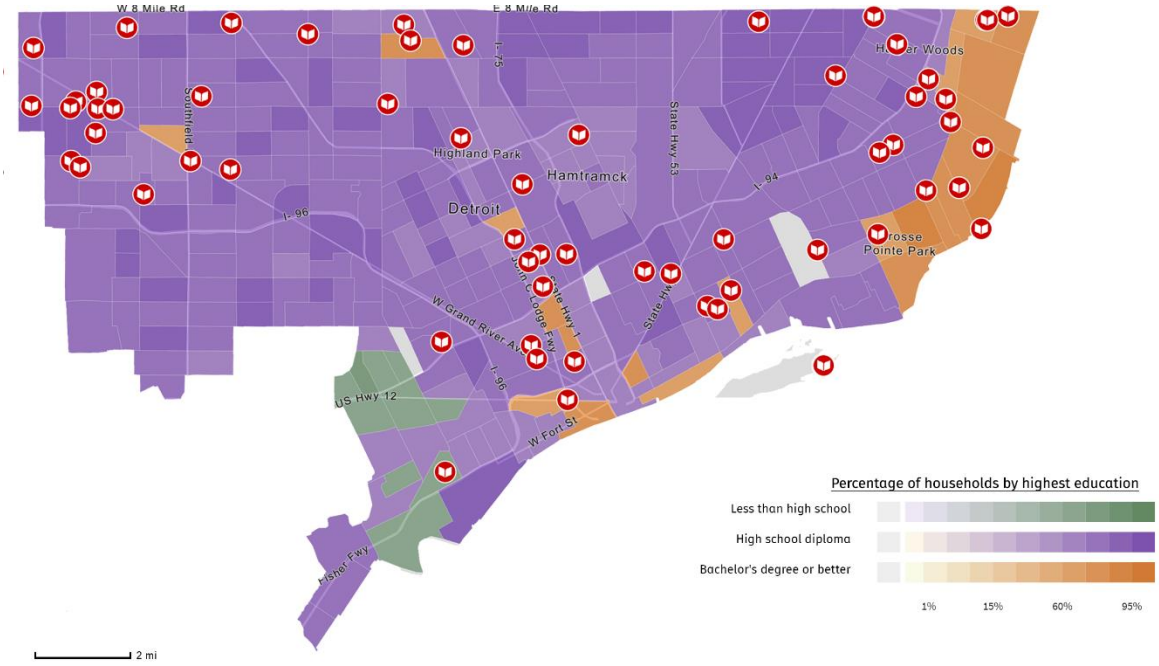

Figure 6. Map of Detroit LFL locations in relation to education attained by population aged 25+, based on census tracts.

Income, however, was a more likely determinant of the presence of LFLs than either education or race, even despite the well-documented correlations between all three factors. This is particularly noticeable in the southeastern parts of Portland, where low-income census tracts are also devoid of LFL locations (Figure 7). For other low-income tracts (the inner southeast and downtown areas), it is possible that geography as well as income plays a major role in the establishment of or lack of LFL boxes. In both cities, areas where median household income was between $50,000 and $74,000 did not house many LFLs. Neither city had any tracts with a majority of households in the $75,000 - $99,999 range from which this research could draw conclusions or correlations.

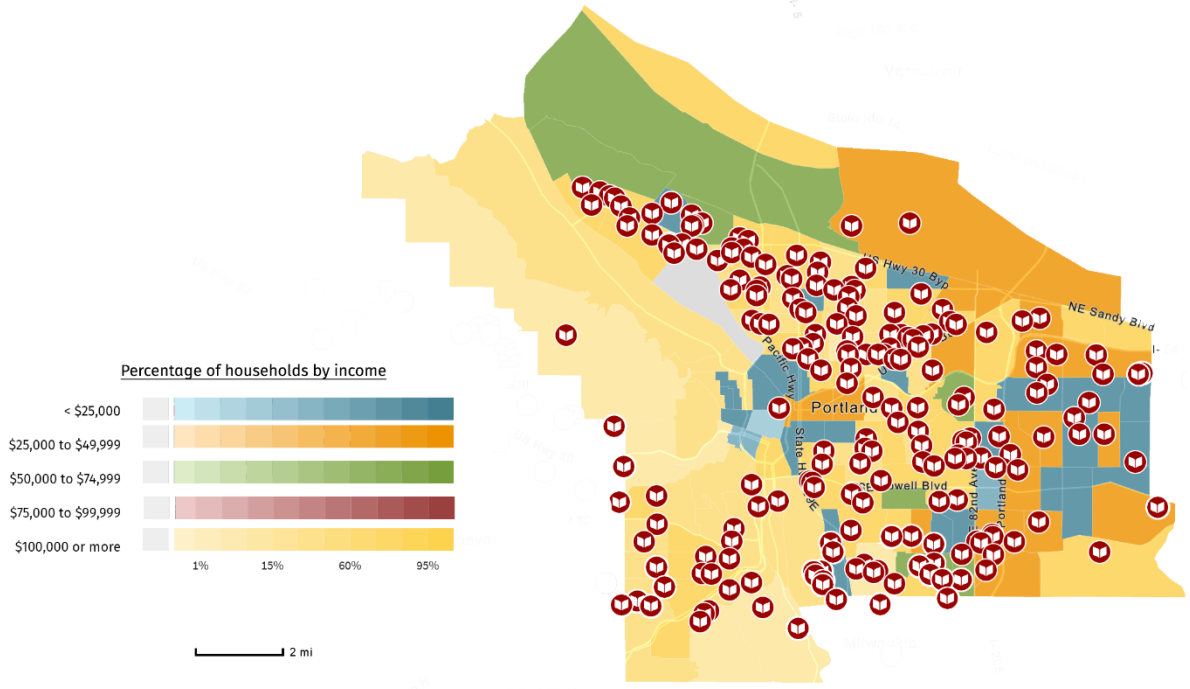

Figure 7. Map of LFL locations in relation to percentage of median household incomes by census tract.

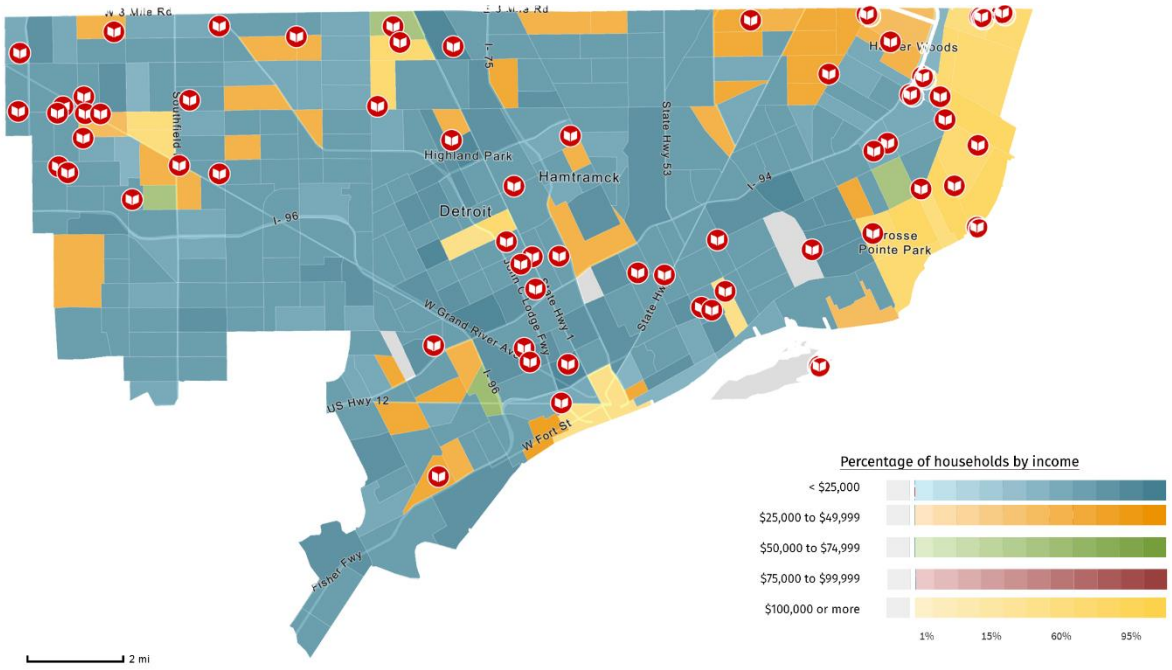

Figure 8. Map of LFL locations in relation to percentage of median household incomes by census tract.

In areas where income was $100,000 or more, there are likely to be an abundance of LFL boxes. The ten LFL boxes in Grosse Pointes meet this metric, as do approximately two-thirds of LFLs in the Portland metro. In Detroit, most boxes were in low-income (<$25,000) neighborhoods of varying severities, with a much smaller occurrence of LFL clusters., but there are also larger spaces of low-income areas underserved by the LFL locations, including the region on the southeastern part of the map (Figure 8).

CONCLUSION

The significance of this data is difficult to fully quantify for several reasons. First, though it is easy to strip LFL down to its mission alone, both the organization and the people who frequent LFLs see them as a social endeavor first. Removing the social element from the evaluation does a great disservice to the movement, as well as to the ability to fully quantify the impact of LFLs in their relative spaces. This research would also be better quantified with a more in-depth analysis of

geographical nuances of study locations. The presence of industrial complexes, large commercial spaces, and other urban features that significantly affect residency can play a role in the distribution of LFLs and cannot be fully understood with generalized map data. Finally, further research would benefit from being conducted on a larger scale, including more cities or comparing full counties in a larger dataset that allows for more accurate analysis of trends.

One thing is certain, however. The LFL movement has a strong foothold in the literary community all over the world, and chances are it will continue to grow and evolve, even in whatever status quo arises out of the current global crisis. Their potential for community building and providing essential services is built into the system itself, and through a combination of tactical urbanism and collaborative ties with public libraries to help inform *curation* instead of *culling*, they can be an even better contribution to the literacy movement.

The latter is especially true if, as the data continues to suggest, the means to possess and access LFLs is mostly concentrated with wealthy individuals in predominantly white neighborhoods. While Literacy for All is a noble battle cry for every book lover, the community must be cautious not to let their enthusiasm outweigh their altruism and leave behind the very communities that could have the most to gain from LFL boxes. The presence of more book depositories cannot and should not be just one more barrier to combating book scarcity for low-income households. It is important that LFL stewards recognize the role they can play in this, and that LFL begin assessing whether the placement of their LFLs worldwide are aligning with the goal they've set out with: to fill book deserts and place LFLs where they can make a big impact.

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